

Marcella Sembrich

the
Victor
recordings
(1904~08)



CD I (75:II)

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| 1 | LA TRAVIATA: Ah! fors' è lui...Sempre libera (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
5 xi 1904; C 1900-I (Victor 85035) | 4:29 |
| 2 | Voci di primavera [Frühlingsstimmen] (Johann Strauss, Jr) <i>It.</i>
5 xi 1904; C 1901-I (Victor 85036) | 4:20 |
| 3 | LA SONNAMBULA: Ah, non giunge (Bellini) <i>It.</i>
19 xi 1904; B 1902-2 (Victor 81047) | 2:55 |
| 4 | Ständchen (Richard Strauss) <i>Ger.</i>
19 xi 1904; B 1950-2 (Victor 81048) | 2:28 |
| 5 | Der Nußbaum (Schumann) <i>Ger.</i>
19 xi 1904; B 1951-3 (Victor 81049) | 2:43 |
| 6 | Zyczenie [The Maiden's Wish] (Chopin) <i>Pol.</i>
19 xi 1904; B 1952-2 (Victor 81050) | 2:27 |
| 7 | FAUST: Ah! È strano poter il viso 'Air des bijoux' (Gounod) <i>It.</i>
19 xi 1904; C 1953-2 (Victor 85037) | 3:52 |
| 8 | DON GIOVANNI: Batti, batti, o bel Masetto (Mozart) <i>It.</i>
19 xi 1904; C 1954-I (Victor 85038) | 3:21 |
| 9 | LA TRAVIATA: Ah! fors' è lui...Sempre libera (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
I iii 1906; C 3152-I (Victor 88018) | 4:30 |
| 10 | LA TRAVIATA: Ah! fors' è lui...Sempre libera (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
I iii 1906; C 3152-2 (unpublished on Victor) | 4:17 |
| 11 | LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR: Ardon gl'incensi 'Mad Scene' (Donizetti) <i>It.</i>
with Darius Lyons, <i>flautist</i>
I iii 1906; C 3154-I (Victor 88021) | 4:26 |

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| 12 | Voci di primavera [Frühlingsstimmen] (Johann Strauss, Jr) <i>It.</i>
2 iii 1906; C 3156-I (Victor 88019) | 4:13 |
| 13 | RIGOLETTO: Caro nome (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
2 iii 1906; C 3157-I (Victor 88017) | 4:34 |
| 14 | Parla (Arditi) <i>It.</i>
14 iii 1906; C 3153-2 (Victor 88023) | 4:12 |
| 15 | ERNANI: Ernani, involami... Tutto sprezzo (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
14 iii 1906; C 3155-2 (Victor 88022) | 4:01 |
| 16 | DON PASQUALE: Ma brava... Vado, corro (Donizetti) <i>It.</i>
with Antonio Scotti, <i>baritone</i>
14 iii 1906; C 3181-2 (Victor 89002) | 3:10 |
| 17 | DON GIOVANNI: Batti, batti, o bel Masetto (Mozart) <i>It.</i>
4 v 1906; C 3359-I (Victor 88026) | 3:50 |
| 18 | FAUST: Ah! Je ris de me voir si belle 'Air des bijoux' (Gounod) <i>Fr.</i>
4 v 1906; C 3360-I (Victor 88024) | 3:19 |
| 19 | LE NOZZE DI FIGARO: Deh vieni, non tardar (Mozart) <i>It.</i>
5 v 1906; C 3362-I (Victor 88020) | 4:21 |
| 20 | LA SONNAMBULA: Ah, non giunge (Bellini) <i>It.</i>
5 v 1906; C 3363-I (Victor 88027) | 3:03 |

CD 2 (74:42)

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| 1 | ALESSANDRO: Lusinghe più care (Handel) <i>It.</i>
10 i 1907; C 4208-I (previously unpublished) | 4:07 |
| 2 | Home, Sweet Home (Bishop) <i>Eng.</i>
10 i 1907; C 4209-I (Victor 88047) | 4:10 |

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| 3 | Home, Sweet Home (Bishop) <i>Eng.</i>
10 i 1907; C 4209-2 (previously unpublished) | 4:15 |
| 4 | MARTHA: The Last Rose of Summer (Moore; arr. Flotow) <i>Eng.</i>
10 i 1907; C 4211-1 (previously unpublished) | 4:10 |
| 5 | The Lass with the Delicate Air (Arne) <i>Eng.</i>
5 x 1907; C 4857-2 (Victor 88096) | 2:35 |
| 6 | IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA: Una voce poco fa (Rossini) <i>It.</i>
5 x 1907; C 4858-3 (Victor 88097) | 4:49 |
| 7 | HALKA: Gdyby rannem słonkiem [If with Early Sunshine] (Moniuszko) <i>Pol.</i>
5 x 1907; C 4860-2 (Victor 88101) | 4:17 |
| 8 | MARTHA: The Last Rose of Summer (Moore; arr. Flotow) <i>Eng.</i>
9 x 1907; C 4859-3 (Victor 88102) | 3:45 |
| 9 | HAMLET: Doute de la lumière (Thomas) <i>Fr.</i>
with Emilio de Gogorza, <i>baritone</i>
9 x 1907; C 4871-1 (Victor 89010) | 4:10 |
| 10 | MIGNON: Connais-tu le pays (Thomas) <i>Fr.</i>
9 x 1907; C 4872-1 (Victor 88098) | 3:04 |
| 11 | The Nightingale (Alabiev) <i>Rus.</i>
9 x 1907; C 4873-1 (Victor 88103) | 3:00 |
| 12 | The Nightingale (Alabiev) <i>Rus.</i>
9 x 1907; C 4873-2 (Victor 88103) | 3:10 |
| 13 | Aime-moi (Chopin; arr. Viardot-Garcia) <i>Pol.</i>
9 x 1907; C 4874-1 (Victor 88099) | 2:04 |
| 14 | Zyczenie [The Maiden's Wish] (Chopin) <i>Pol.</i>
9 x 1907; C 4875-1 (Victor 88100) | 1:55 |

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| 15 | NORMA: Casta diva...Ah, bello a me ritorna (Bellini) <i>It.</i>
II x 1907; C 4877-I (Victor 88104) | 4:10 |
| 16 | I PURITANI: Qui la voce...Vien diletto (Bellini) <i>It.</i>
II x 1907; C 4879-I (Victor 88105) | 4:35 |
| 17 | LE NOZZE DI FIGARO: Sull'aria! Che soave zeffiretto (Mozart) <i>It.</i>
with Emma Eames, <i>soprano</i>
25 i 1908; C 5040-3 (Victor 95202) | 2:59 |
| 18 | Si mes vers avaient des ailes (Hahn) <i>Fr.</i> | 1:56 |
| 19 | Wohin? (Schubert) <i>Ger.</i>
30 i 1908; C 5046-I (IRCC 129) | 2:05 |
| 20 | DIE LUSTIGE WITWE: Dolce amor (Lehar) <i>It.</i>
30 i 1908; C 5044-I (Victor 88107) | 4:13 |
| 21 | DIE LUSTIGE WITWE: Dolce amor (Lehar) <i>It.</i>
30 i 1908; C 5044-2 (Victor 88107) | 4:21 |

CD 1: tracks 1 - 8 with piano; tracks 9 - 20 with the Victor Orchestra

CD 2: tracks 1 - 12, 15 - 17 and 20 - 21 with the Victor Orchestra; tracks 13 - 14 with Marcella Sembrich, pianist; tracks 18 - 19 with Frank La Forge, pianist

Producer: Ward Marston

Transfers and audio restoration by Ward Marston

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The century that began with Beethoven's *Fidelio* in 1805, encompassed the works of great opera composers from Berlioz to Weber, Bellini to Wagner, and just about ended with Puccini's *La Bohème* in 1896, must surely be described as the great age of opera. The composers knew the singers and composed their works for specific voices. Beyond that they were befriended by painters and writers, and sought after by royalty and statesmen. A spirit of idealism and a love of art still radiates from that time and continue to dominate the repertory of our opera houses today.

Marcella Sembrich embodied this spirit of 19th-century romanticism. For 40 years one of the most beloved singers in the world, her formative links to Chopin, Liszt and Brahms and her brilliance in 'bel canto' opera gave her an exceptional musical range. Her rival, Adelina Patti, might have retained her singular status even after Sembrich shared rôles with her at

Covent Garden from 1880 to 1884. Patti, fifteen years her senior, was first on the scene and never relinquished her throne. But more than any other, Sembrich held her own and was viewed as separate but equal by many. The operas of Bellini, Donizetti and Rossini

demonstrated but a small part of her musical gifts. Unlike Patti, essentially an operatic performer almost since birth, Sembrich was a highly trained musician; a superb pianist and violinist; a concert artist whose programmes included the great *Lieder* of Schubert, Schumann and her friend Brahms, as well as seldom performed works by Bach and Mozart. In 1880 Sembrich sang for Clara Schumann, who wrote in her

day book: 'Today Madame Sembrich was here and sang many of Robert's songs. Certainly no one has ever sung them as she does, and my only regret is that Robert could not have lived to hear them.' Fortunately, this brilliance and versatility can still be heard on her recordings.

Praxede Marcelline Kochanska



Sembrich as Marguerite

(her mother's family name was Sembrich) was born on 15 February 1858 in the small village of Wisniewczyk near the city of Lemberg. Her parents were of Polish descent, but Galicia at that time was part of the Austrian empire, which covered large areas of Poland and Hungary. Her family was musical, and her father taught her to play the piano and violin at a young age. At eleven Marcella entered the Lemberg Conservatory to further her study of the violin. While there she studied harmony with the director, Charles Mikuli (one of Chopin's finest pupils), violin with Bruckmann and piano with Wilhelm Stengel. A pupil of Moschèles, Stengel later married Sembrich and had a great influence on her development. In 1873, at the age of fifteen, she left Lemberg to continue her studies in Vienna. There she studied piano with Julius Epstein, violin with Helmesberger, and she began her vocal training with Viktor von Rokitansky. In 1874 it is said she performed for Franz Liszt who, legend has

it, told the young girl: 'My little angel, God has given you three pairs of wings with which to fly through the country of music; they are all equal: give up none of them, but sing, sing for the world, for you have the voice of an angel.' This story might be apocryphal, but the imagery is lovely.



Marcella Sembrich

Sometime in 1875 or 1876 Marcella went to Milan with her mother to study with the younger Lamperti, Giovanni Battista, for a period of eight months, and she studied Italian as well. After her career had begun she returned to Italy and resumed her studies, but this time with the elder Lamperti, Francesco, the teacher of Emma Albani. Sembrich considered Francesco her 'only' voice teacher. Later she spoke of his 'remarkable technical knowledge, power of expression and stupendous enthusiasm', and said he was an inexhaustible source of inspiration to her. She worked with him intermittently over a period of several years. While in Italy she wrote to a friend at home: 'My voice develops a great

deal. It is a coloratura, but more a dramatic coloratura.' Francesco Lamperti had been a friend of Pasta and Rubini, and formed Sembrich out of that great vocal tradition.

At the age of nineteen, on 3 June 1877, Marcella Sembrich made her operatic début in Athens as Elvira in *I Puritani*. In Athens she sang 24 performances of *I Puritani*, *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Dinorah*. At this time she married Wilhelm Stengel. In 1878 she joined the Dresden Royal Opera, and remained two years, gaining invaluable stage experience. She also took occasional leaves of absence to sing in Milan, Vienna and Warsaw. On New Year's Day in 1879 she sang in a concert at the Leipzig Gewandhaus under Johannes Brahms, which featured the première of Brahms's Violin Concerto performed by Joseph Joachim. A spectacular success at the Lower Rhine Festival in 1880 brought about interest from London. Her début at Covent Garden was as Lucia on 12 June 1880. She also sang in *La Sonnambula* and *Les Huguenots*. The

Illustrated London News reported that 'a third soprano of rare gifts and powers has been added to the establishment already in possession of Mesdames Patti and Albani.' Over the next four years at Covent Garden she added *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, *L'Etoile du Nord*, *Rigoletto* and *La Traviata* to her repertoire.

Some of these early casts are mouth-watering: *I Puritani* in 1883 with Sembrich, Francesco Marconi, Mattia Battistini and Edouard de Reszke; or in 1884, Sembrich as Susanna in *Le Nozze di Figaro* with Emma Albani as the Countess, Pauline Lucca as Cherubino, Edouard de Reszke as the Count and Antonio Cotogni (Jean de Reszke's teacher) as Figaro.

In 1883 she made an acclaimed début as Lucia on 24 October, the second night of the new Metropolitan Opera in New York. Henry Krehbiel wrote in *The New York Tribune*: 'No singer ever won recognition of a New York audience more easily than Mme. Sembrich did ... The new favorite's tones are singularly clear



Sembrich as Mimì

and brilliant, and she encompasses, without seeming effort, the highest notes in the music.' She followed this with appearances as Elvira, Violetta, Amina, Gilda, Rosina and Zerlina. It was at a benefit concert for Edwin Abbey on 21 April 1884 that she demonstrated her extraordinary musical accomplishments by following a performance of the Second Act of *Barbiere di Siviglia* by playing two movements of De Beriot's Violin Concerto No. 7. As an encore she played Chopin's Ballade in A-flat on the piano, and then sang 'Ah! non giunge' from *La Sonnambula*. James Huneker wrote of these feats repeated in Paris: 'Have you heard Sembrich? Have you seen her at the piano? Do you know that she fiddles like an angel?' She did not return to the Met for almost fifteen years as the management changed in the 1884-85 season. But her international career had begun.

In answer to the demand, she spent the next decade touring the world appearing in opera and concert, occasionally

with her own company. She had first sung in Russia in 1880, immediately becoming a great favourite of the Czar, and soon returned to St Petersburg regularly during the winter seasons. The casts were extraordinary. Sembrich's leading men included Marconi, De Lucia,



Sembrich as Rosina

Borgatti, Masini and Battistini. She appeared regularly in Vienna, Paris, Berlin, Madrid, Lisbon, Stockholm, Warsaw and Brussels, among others, always as a guest 'prima donna'. It was not until 1895 that she returned to Covent Garden, and in 1898 she rejoined the Metropolitan Opera. She remained with the Met until her retirement on 6 February 1909 in a spectacular farewell that included scenes

from *Don Pasquale*, *Il Barbiere* and *La Traviata*. Caruso and Bonci were her leading men on this grand occasion. After a final tour of Europe in 1909-10, Sembrich performed only in concert. Her programmes covered a wide variety of song literature, and set a new standard for recital programmes. W. J. Henderson

described her as the 'greatest Lieder singer among women ever heard in New York ... There was something indescribable, elusive, intangible in her art.' Her accompanist, Frank La Forge, later wrote: 'It was her deep love of music itself that was so outstanding and which conveyed to the audience the inspiration which she felt.'

After the death of her husband in 1917, she ceased concertising and devoted herself to teaching. She became the director of the vocal departments at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia and the Juilliard School in New York. Among her students were Alma Gluck, Dusolina Giannini, Hulda Lashanska and Queena Mario. Marcella Sembrich died in New York on 11 January 1935, a month short of her 77th birthday.

Early recordings were made by Sembrich for Bettini and Columbia, and Lionel Mapelson caught her on several remarkable cylinders in 1903 from the stage of the Met (on Romophone 81027-2). But the Victor recordings, made between 1904, when she was 46, and 1912, are technically the most advanced, and present her in the widest repertoire. She sings arias from the traditional coloratura rôles she excelled in, as well as a number of songs that served as encores. Of

great interest are a few examples of German *Lieder* and Reynaldo Hahn's 'Si mes vers aviaient des ailes'. She sings this simple, evocative song without sentimentality; the clear tones of her silvery voice add to the expressivity, as does her smooth legato. The duets with Eames, de Gogorza and Scotti reveal her musicality as she responsively blends her voice with theirs.

While Sembrich must have been well past her prime, she was still singing brilliantly when she recorded. Highly individualistic, she uses her lyric voice in a dramatic fashion. Her voice is crystalline, but is projected with a distinctive bold attack. Often when listening to these recordings you are transported to another time, when bravura display was not cold and technical, but was used to express complex human emotion. The interpolated high notes and ornamentation of her severely abbreviated 'Casta Diva' seem to come from the 'source'. Like Patti, Sembrich's roots stretched back to Giuditta Pasta, the first Norma, through her teacher. Each recording from her repertoire seems fresh and full of new revelations. As La Forge wrote, Sembrich never stopped reworking her interpretations. Marcella Sembrich had genius; she was truly one of the most remarkable performing artists of all time.



Marcella Sembrich

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